

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.2—French Revolution

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

On the eve of the revolution, French society and, to a great extent, politics were dominated by a hereditary nobility. On the other hand, France's economy, increasingly tied to the growing Atlantic economy through its colonial empire, was dominated by a capitalist [bourgeoisie](#). Both the nobility and the bourgeoisie benefited from ties to the monarchy. The nobility maintained its social prestige through its role at the royal court, and the wealthy bourgeoisie enriched itself by having royal protection in the mercantilist economic system.

Part of the French peasantry still owed feudal obligations to the nobility, that is, laws and practices left over from the medieval era. But a large part of the peasantry was made up of small, independent landowners. Similarly, French manufacturing took place in workshops rather than in large factories. The urban, artisan laborers who worked the shops were known collectively as *sans-culottes*—"without breeches"—because their pants hung loose to the feet, unlike the clothing of the nobility.

France's colonial empire shrank severely when it lost India and North America to the English in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years' War. However, revenues from the empire in the late eighteenth century, especially from the slave plantation-based Caribbean colony of St. Domingue (later Haiti), enriched French society, especially the commercial bourgeoisie.

CAUSES

Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau had criticized the French system of absolute monarchy during the decades leading up to the revolution. Heredity was not a rational way to choose political leaders, they argued. A better system would be one in which each individual, freely exercising reason through the equality of a vote, would take part in choosing a government. God did not reserve talent to the nobility. Why then, should France reward them with privilege? While the French monarchy supported the American revolution to check Britain's power, Enlightened France supported it because of its ideals of freedom and equality.

In 1787, state debt from both the Seven Years' War and French support of the American revolution proved too great for the French monarchy to bear. Failing in his attempt to levy taxes on the nobility, which paid little or no tax, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General, a large meeting of delegates representing the clergy, the nobility, and the "Third Estate," that is, everyone else in society. The delegates, including clerics and nobles, as well as representatives of the Third Estate, brought with them grievances from their constituents, often phrased in the Enlightenment language of liberty and equality.

The fiscal crisis coincided with a spike in the price of bread, which affected the *sans-culottes* most intensely. It was not only hunger that inspired the ensuing bread riots. Beneath calls for bread lay an anti-capitalist cry for government regulation of the market to provide a measure of security, particularly to the poor. The call for a degree of economic equality resonated with the Third Estate's own grievances. Emboldened by the *sans-culottes'* action, the Third Estate withdrew from the Estates-General and declared itself the National Assembly in June 1789. The revolution was on.

RESULTS

The Constitution of 1792 guaranteed representative government, civil liberties like freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly, and equality before the law. Furthermore, it ended the special legal privilege of the nobility and clergy. The revolution became more radical after the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. The National Assembly granted unprecedented legal rights to women, abolished slavery, and instituted price controls. But these reforms were rolled back under the Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte, who came to power in a *coup d'état* in 1799.

Though Napoleon was uninterested in genuinely representative government on a parliamentary model, he enshrined many of the principles of the 1792 Constitution, such as equality before the law and civil liberties (though not freedom of the press) in his Napoleonic Code of 1807. This legal basis would remain intact with the 1814 restoration of the French monarchy under Louis XVIII. The new king, too, would not be absolute, but rather would rule under the Constitutional Convention, which placed limits on the monarch's authority and provided for a degree of representative government in the Chamber of Deputies, elected by a small, wealthy percentage of French society.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What groups of people populated France before the revolution?
2. What crises provoked the revolution in France?
3. How did different groups of people in France understand Enlightenment ideas?
4. How was the French monarchy of 1814 different from the pre-revolutionary monarchy?
5. In what ways did the French revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this freedom?
6. In what ways did the French revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this equality?